Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

Gwendolyn Moncrieff-Gould, University of Kings College

Red was the colour Thomas Mann used throughout his novel *Death in Venice* to represent the sensual, Dionysian world that tempts his main character, Aschenbach. The novella, written in 1912, followed Mann's protagonist as he vacationed in Venice during an outbreak of cholera, forced into his wanderlust by a case of writer's block. The usually strict, orderly Aschenbach left his literary world behind as he was seduced by the image of Tadzio, a young boy based on a Polish child Mann had met while himself on vacation in Venice. Tadzio, occasionally compared to a god, represents all things Dionysian and sensual in the novel. He, along with the three psychopomps, or guides for the dead, all accented in red, follow Aschenbach throughout his time in Venice, drawing him closer and closer to the path of the cholera plague until he finally succumbs. *Death in Venice* demonstrates the fall from balance to chaos, a movement from Apollonian order to wild Dionysian desire and abandonment of the self. Mann's use of colour, particularly red, highlights his protagonist's collapse, drawing both Aschenbach's and the readers' eyes to the elements of sensuality and lust that ultimately corrupted the soul.

The literary, Apollonian world that Aschenbach inhabited was black and white, driven by a cold rationality that allowed him to embrace platonic ideals and perfect his art while denying himself any kind of Dionysian sensuality. It was only once he had lost his absolute and rational understanding of the world that he was able to see and live in colour; the further Aschenbach entrenched himself in Venice, and the sensual beauty that it contained, the more vibrant his world became. By the end of the novel, the rot that had begun in Aschenbach's mind, freeing him from his former rational constraints, had spread to his exterior appearance.

The colors, and indeed other sensual objects that Aschenbach had once noticed and delighted in, became no more than background noise, and he became unable to recognize the contagion that had taken hold of him. In his final breath, Aschenbach abandoned all attempts at self-control and recognition, seeking desperately to regain the fine balance that he had enjoyed while hovering between the Dionysian and Apollonian, sensual enough to see beauty around him and rational enough to restrain himself from becoming lost in it.

Aschenbach, the son of "men who lived their strict, decent lives in the service of kind and state" (Mann, 8), came from a naturally Apollonian background. His family had for generations been dry and conscientious, exacting, and yet with his mother came the "foreign traits that betrayed themselves in his appearance" (8), the passion, impulse, and Dionysian sensuality that would corrupt him. While living and writing in Munich, Aschenbach strove to live as the heroes he wrote did, "the conception of an intellectual and virginal manliness, which clenches its teeth and stands in modest defiance of the swords and spears that pierce its side" (11). Swords and spears to Aschenbach were any kind of sensuality, distractions from the pure form of his writing. As an artist, Aschenbach strove to emulate the platonic ideals, to ultimately create a work that could be taken as a form in itself. And yet Mann writes that "he was only called to the constant tension of his career, not actually born to it" (9). Aschenbach seemed to realize this as he discovered his desire and need for travel, brought on by the vision induced by the red-haired stranger guarding the gates of the cemetery. The unexpected man in the cemetery, the first psychopomp or guide to the dead, was one of a series of irregularities to begin in Aschenbach's life. His trip to the cemetery, in itself a break from his daily routine, was the first of many steps that led him away from the life he had chosen for himself and into the path of the plague.

Aschenbach's first vision, of a jungle, is the first instance in which he was taken out of

himself. Losing his Apollonian ability for self-awareness and control, he became immersed in his vision of the jungle, in the sensuality and pure emotion of the experience. It is here, too, that Aschenbach began to fleetingly notice his surroundings in an immediate rather than analytical way, passingly commenting on the “shadowy and glassy-green” sea, and the “mammoth milk-white blossoms” (6) that he saw around him, when he had previously passed by the English Gardens and sunset without a second thought (3). The beginning of Aschenbach's sensuality here marked the start of his abandonment of the Apollonian principles he had once lived by. Aschenbach had described himself as “too preoccupied to be an amateur of the gay outer world” (6), preferring instead to restrict himself to regular trips a summer home, where he would, as always, continue with his writing and striving after the forms. Despite this, he was able to justify spending “three or four weeks of lotus-eating at some one of the gay world's playgrounds” (7), purposefully forgetting his cares and sinking into a Dionysian appreciation of the world around him.

The psychopomp, with his grin reminiscent of that of death's, was the first to set Aschenbach on his Dionysian discovery of the world around him. It was in the first psychopomp, the curious stranger who appeared in the cemetery, that Aschenbach noticed the first flash of red within the story, remarking on the stranger's “colorless, red-lashed eyes” (5). It is this red that is repeated throughout the rest of the story, marking the eroticism that lured Aschenbach away from himself, driving him into Tadzio's, and the plague's path. As a child, Aschenbach had an hourglass that contained rust-red sand (61); this, the only reference to red, or to any colour before he had met the first psychopomp, kept the red safely contained behind glass, finite, and untouchable. As Aschenbach continued his journey to Venice, he effectively immersed himself in the hourglass, first noticing red in those around him, and then taking on the color red, and all of its characteristics, as his own. Aschenbach had noted with

disgust the old man, in “a rakish panama with a coloured scarf, and a red cravat...the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge” (17), pretending to be as youthful as his companions. Soon after Aschenbach saw Tadzio for the first time; and with this new vision of the god-like child came an appreciation for the unmistakable red breast-knot (32), for its youthful and erotic connotations, driving out of his head any memories of his disgust for the affectations of youth.

Aschenbach's eating of the first “great luscious, dead-ripe fruit” (32), the perfectly red strawberries, was his first conscious acceptance of anything red, and thus erotic, moving him into the Dionysian and away from the Apollonian. Even here, while he was still able to appreciate the ripe perfection of the strawberries, Aschenbach found himself unable to concentrate on his work, preferring to “[give] himself up to contemplating the activities of the exquisite Adigo” (31). From this point on Aschenbach became fixated not only on Tadzio, but on the colors that he wore, noting with pleasure the red of his tie and the blue of his sailor suit (29), immersing himself in the appearances that he had once rejected as overly sensual, and allowing himself to be drawn away from the pure, colorless forms of his own written art. Aschenbach fought this degeneracy, attempting to flee from the city; but his fate was effectively decided when he first stepped in to the coffin-like gondola, operated by another psychopomp ready to usher him towards his death. The rest of his stay in Venice was a continuation of his decline, ending with his contraction of the plague and death.

By the end of his stay in Venice, Aschenbach had given up entirely on the Apollonian. Eschewing his former sense of propriety, he consented to let his barber do him up in the same way as the old man he had found so repulsive. His “dry, anaemic lips grew full, they turned the colour of ripe strawberries, the lines round eyes and mouth were treated with a facial cream and gave place to youthful bloom” (68), making him supposedly ready to fall in love. Clad in a red-necktie and gaily striped hat (69), Aschenbach attempted to bring into

himself the beauty that he saw in Tadzio, forgetting that the material, that simple colors, would not be enough to bring him into the pure form that he was once able to understand and create in his writing. The red of the pomegranate juice that he had once so carefully used to moisten his lips (57) consumed him, drove him further and further away from any kind of rational thought. By the time he ate the last strawberries, “overripe and soft” (70), he was barely able to notice his surroundings, not caring that the fruit, and eroticism, that he had once only tasted in its perfection had become flawed and stale. In this frenzied, Dionysian state, Aschenbach could no longer see even the colors of the world around him. The sea, which had only so recently taken on a blue hue instead of its usual colorless appearance, became unfriendly; “once so full of colour and life, [it] looked now autumnal, out of season” (72). The rust-red canvasses of the beach cabins were replaced by the black cloth of an abandoned camera (72), leaving only Aschenbach to bear witness to the death and plague that finally consumed Venice, and him along with it. His Dionysian obsession with the external removed his ability for rationality; in his desperation for the beauty and eroticism that he saw in Tadzio, he effectively infected himself, wilfully ignoring the warning signs that he as an Apollonian should have seen and heeded.

Aschenbach, having never dared to live with his hands open (9), found both his release and destruction in his shift into the Dionysian. His acceptance of and desire for youth, beauty, and eroticism created a plague within him, rotting both his mind and body until they were both just empty shells of their former Apollonian selves. In travelling to Venice, Aschenbach was able to have his eyes opened to the colors and sensuality that he had formerly repressed; but in remaining, in giving up his rationality, he went too far, and found himself unable to appreciate the beauty that he had so briefly been able to see in the colors of the world around him. The strains of red that runs through the novel give us an insight into Aschenbach's state,

carrying us through his recognition and rejection of his sensual desires, into his first taste of passion, and finally to his consumption and destruction, to the razing of his mind and body by his desires, and their manifestation in the plague.

Works Cited

Mann, Thomas. Death in Venice. New York: Dover Publications, 1995. Print.